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Interview with Alija Izetbegović

Bosnia's "Wise King", Alija Izetbegovic's last interview was conducted with writer-editor Akif Emre. Alija Izetbegovic was the hero of the Bosnian Muslim resistance during the siege of Sarajevo, the man who led his country to independence. He died in Sarajevo, on Sunday, October 19, 2003 at the age of 78.

Akif Emre, formerly editor-in-chief of the *World Bulletin*, interviewed the legendary Bosnian leader Alija Izetbegovic shortly before his death. Izetbegović, who established a free Bosnian state in the face of overwhelming difficulties and where a lesser man might have failed, is considered by the people as Pater Patriae renowned as the "Wise King" thanks to his wide knowledge and background in political matters.

Akif Emre: Before you struggled as an intellectual and a political leader, I think that knowing the circumstances of your private and public life may help us understand a lot of things better. So, can we start with what kind of family you were brought up in? What kind of historical and cultural heritage did the family you were brought up in reflect?

Alija Izetbegović : In order to make clear the intellectual and cultural milieu in which I was brought up, I should like to start with the story of a child with the same name as myself "Alija", the story of a child who was destined to marry a Turkish girl when he grew up. At the end of the 19th century while completing his military service in Uskudar, he married a girl aged 19 whose name was Sadiqah. By her he had several offspring, one of them my late father Mustafa. In 1927, we moved to a city called Bosanski Samac where Muslims were concentrated. This is an area that Sultan Abdul Aziz allocated for Muslims based on

“Ush”, a region inhabited by refugees. I lived there with my siblings: two boys and three girls. I was the middle child. My father was connected with trade. But it cannot be said that he was good at it. After he went bankrupt at a time when I was two-years old we repaired to Sarajevo. There were both negative and positive aspects to our settling in Sarajevo. The negative results were due to my father who worked as a small-time clerk. We had a difficult life; our days passed in trouble. The good side was the chance to have an education. I finished high school and University there. After finishing high school, I studied in the Faculty of Agriculture for three years. Then I matriculated in the Law Faculty, where I studied until I graduated in 1956. My childhood was spent in different parts of Yugoslavia. The Yugoslavia of my childhood was different from the Yugoslavia of the Tito era that followed. At that time, the Kara Georgevich dynasty was in power. The founder of this dynasty was the famous Kara Georgevich, who had rebelled against the Turks in 1804, setting in motion a movement for Serbian independence that was finally recognised at the Berlin Congress in 1878, whereupon Serbia emerged as Britain’s ally in the Balkans, a status she has retained ever since, including both world wars. The Kara Georgevich dynasty was installed at the beginning of the 20th century; from 1903 onwards this dynasty was in power; Yugoslavia was firmly in its grip. Serbs, who accounted for 40% of the population, were the dominant ethnic group. The key posts in the administration; the civil service, the army, the police, even education, were all in Serbian hands. To the best of my recollection all the teachers in my secondary school were Serbs. My childhood was passed under a Serbian hegemony. At this time there were three officially recognised nationalities: Serbs, Croat and Slovenes. Serbs were totally dominant. Muslims were not recognised as a nationality. This situation helps to explain the political position of the Muslims. The economic situation of the Muslims deteriorated with the Land Reform Act; after the First World War. In practical terms land reform aimed at the impoverishment of the Muslims. Under land reform 10 million acres of land belonging to Muslims were confiscated. The result was a process of depopulation; within a few years very rich families had become as poor as beggars. These years were a very hard time for Muslims. In 1918, the states of Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia and Bosnia-Herzegovina united against the possibility of an Italian invasion, thereby forming Yugoslavia (South Slavs) under the Kara George dynasty, to all intents and purposes a Serbian empire, a situation that endured till the German occupation in 1941, whereupon civil war ensued. In the Yugoslav era the Muslims had a foundation the name of which was the Yugoslav Muslim Organisation, abbreviated to YTO. The leader of the organisation was Mehmet Spaho, who was killed by Serbs in 1939. However, he was not able to achieve any concrete results in spite of his being the only person who managed to unite the Muslims. The organisation, which aimed at Bosnian autonomy, managed to gather most of the Muslims under its roof. **AE: But autonomy could not be obtained. It grabbed my attention that the avenue in front of the SDA General Centre where we are doing this interview is to be renamed the Mehmet Spaho Avenue out of respect to his memory.**

AI : As this aim could not be achieved, Serbs and Croats aspired to divide Bosnia between them. Just prior to World War II, in August 1939, they signed an agreement sharing Bosnia between them. This is the famous Seyetkovich-Macak agreement signed between Seyetkovich representing Serbia and Macak representing Croatia. In Bosnia, where the Muslims were the overall majority, places where the Serbs predominated would be given to Serbia, and places where Croats predominated would go to Croatia. In places where the Muslims were in the majority Muslims would be considered as non-existent and the terrain given to Serbs or Croats according to the proportion of the population. This was the picture of the economic, political and social situation. The Muslims remained deprived of all kinds of support.

AE: You grew up in a town where the Muslims were besieged and left without leaders. In the political situation of the world at that time, the state of the Muslims left a lot to be desired. But as far as we know, even under these conditions they were alive and Islamic studies thrived. What were you doing at this time?

AI: Just before World War II there was a group known as the Young Muslims (Bladi Müselmani) in Sarajevo in 1938. This group used to look for solutions to the problems of the Muslims as understood by the thinkers of these times and the movements in the Islamic world in the preceding (19th) century. Among these I can single out important names like Rashid Rida and Muhammad Abduh. Young Muslims were influenced by the ideology associated with their names. By staying in touch with this group I was attracted by their ideas and how these ideas affected the Islamic awakening. Islamic history and the role of Muslims in history figured prominently in our agenda; we discussed a wide variety of topics. Muslims established three big centres of civilisation: in the Middle East, in India as symbolised by the Taj Mahal and the civilisation identified with the Alhambra in Spain. We were discussing the golden age of the Turks from India to Vienna and how it contrasted with the situation of the Islamic world now. We believed that the Islamic world should be in better shape than it was, and we were trying to find ways to help bring this about. I worked closely with this group. Nonetheless, the Islamic education that I received from my family was the most important fact in my formation. My deceased mother Hiba was a very God-fearing woman. I retain an imperishable memory of my mother and I used to love the same things as she did. My mother was a woman loving her religion and living Islam. Already the rooted family traditions and the education that we had were the principal determinants and the most important factors in helping to protect our Muslim identity in a chaotic situation. When I was 15-16, I remember my being alienated from religion. As a young person I was an omnivorous reader; the books that I read were influential in such a situation as was mine. Among the books I read there were books on atheism, but this was a temporary phase in my life. When I was 17, I reverted to Islam and till today I have never abandoned the path of Islam. The most important reason for my reversion was my deep-rooted hatred of Communism and Fascism. To this day I hate these two ideologies.

AE: In the social and cultural experiences of the Bosnian Muslims, in their pains and sorrows, I think a key factor must be the Ottoman withdrawal from here. How did the withdrawal of the civilisation that thrived here for centuries affect the eclectic atmosphere with which Bosnian Muslims were now confronted?

AI: The withdrawal of the Ottomans from Bosnia after the Berlin Congress (1878) was a historical turning-point for the Bosnian Muslims. This was not restricted to a change of administration, it signified a move designed to force the Muslims to change their culture. More than the mere passage from Turkish imperial administration to that of the Austro-Hungarian empire it was a cultural and political catastrophe. We belonged to the same tradition of Muslim civilisation as the Turks belonged to. Bosnian Muslims took this change very hard. In our history there are three different 8 numbers. These are 1878, 1908 and 1918. In 1878,

Turks withdrew from Bosnia, and the Austrian invasion started. Officially, the Ottomans retained sovereignty over Bosnia for 30 years afterward. With the Anex agreement in 1908, the dominion of the Sultan over Bosnia officially came to an end. The portrait of the Austro-Hungarian emperor replaced the Sultan's on the wall. These 30 years were very tragic for the Bosnian Muslims. They lived in hope that the Turks would come back because of the agreement in the Berlin Congress. A number of people were realistic enough to understand that this was no longer possible. It was a period of waiting with people oscillating between hope and fear. Muslims who were waiting for the return of the Ottomans did not even go to school; over this period, Muslims lost 30 years of time. Along the way a rich and elite group of people emigrated to Turkey; only the poor stayed behind. And in 1908, with the application of Anex, a fresh wave of immigration began. The continuous decline in the Muslim population went on till the first half of this century. As a result of a 70-year long period of immigration, the Muslim population decreased from 40% to 30 %. The emigration of the educated and wealthy Muslims to Turkey after the withdrawal of the Ottomans is the most important event determining the current situation of Bosnia. Bosnia faced these crises deprived of its best people.

AE: I think the period that determines your life started at this point. Let's talk about the period after World War II. The Cold War had started, and a new Yugoslavia was established. What kind of activity were you involved in during these years?

AI: I did not join the army during the World War II, I was a deserter. In 1945, after the Communists came to power, I was called up. I was in the army for a year. In 1946, I was arrested and sentenced to three years' imprisonment for political reasons. I was released on March 4, 1949. I married Miss Khalida. By her I have two daughters and a son. I continued my education, matriculating in the Faculty of Agriculture, where I remained till 1952. In that year, after leaving the Faculty of Agriculture I matriculated in law. In 1963, I graduated as a lawyer. My business life falls into two phases: in the first ten years after graduating I worked as a manager for the construction of a large dam in Montenegro. My experiences there were of great advantage to me subsequently. In 1964, after returning to work as a lawyer, I worked as a legal consultant for the big companies until I retired in 1981. During this period, I wrote many articles on Islam and published them in various magazines. In 1969, I drafted the Islamic Declaration. In 1974-75, I wrote the book entitled *Islam between East and West*. The Islamic Declaration was translated into five or six languages. I understand that one of the languages into which it was translated was Turkish. My book *Islam between East and West* was translated into more than ten languages. The first edition was published whilst I was in prison, because in 1983 having been tried along with 12 of my friends, I was sentenced to 14 years.

AE: We know about the time you served in prison with your friends because your thoughts had a big echo in the world. In a sense you had a universal language as the result of a struggle for independence in the name of Islam under a Communist régime. How was your life in prison, what were you doing at this time?

AI: The only thing that I can say about life in prison is that it was very hard. I cannot say that I had especially bad treatment, but I was isolated from society; for six years I could not get outside the walls. I spent 5 years and 8 months in the prison in Foca. Almost half of this time was spent in the workshop of the prison. On account of bronchitis I had to leave off working, because the workshop that I was working in was a carpentry shop, and physical power was required. We were making things like tables and chairs. During my time behind bars, I read many books. I was able to read 30 or 40 pages from different books, so I read a library of some 50,000 pages. I was very important in the eyes of the other prisoners since I was a lawyer. Whatever your business is, in prison you are nothing. But being a lawyer means you are privileged, because lawyers have duties to help and guide prisoners, and writing their petitions appealing for better treatment. As the sole lawyer in prison I was constantly in demand. Our dormitory held 100 inmates. People kept telling me what they experienced in their past. This helped me to understand life and people better. Most of the prisoners in our dormitory were there because convicted of murder, and I knew the stories of each one. I used to help them write their petitions and prepare their defence. They would tell me about themselves. In a paradoxical way, I accounted myself lucky to be living amongst murderers! Thieves and swindlers are people of low character; but murderers are different. Half of them were there either on account of personal reasons, and some became murderers because of their objections to the injustice of the system, or they had certain personality problems. As I listened to their life stories, I understood life better. Although it was forbidden, I was writing and taking notes. A prisoner smuggled out the 13 notebooks I wrote in the prison. For ten years, I was unable to read these notes. In 1999, I started to revise them, and in the same year they were published in Bosnian under the title *Escape to Freedom*. The reason I chose this title was because my soul found escape to freedom in reading and writing. The book was translated into English and will be published in America. These are the traces of my years in prison couched in reminiscent language. Of course, bad things are forgotten; I prefer not to remember them any more. I am not a retrospective person; rather, I always look toward the future.

AE: After getting out, you had a historic mission. You became President, you declared the independence of Bosnia for the first time. On account of this your people were massacred. Were you expecting such an outcome?

AI: In December, 1991, five months before the war, I explained in a speech my worries about what might happen in Bosnia-Herzegovina; I explained what would happen if the independence of Bosnia were challenged. Some took my words as prophesy, because whatever I had said came true. Yugoslavia separated into its component parts; Croatia and Slovenia declared independence. Bosnia-Herzegovina had to make a choice, either to leave Yugoslavia or remain part of it. In my opinion we had no choice; we had no future together with countries like Serbia and Montenegro that formed a rump Yugoslavia. Before that, I tried to devise a solution to prevent the break-up of Yugoslavia along with Gligorov, the President of Macedonia, because the unity of Yugoslavia was in our favour. Even if the Muslims were concentrated in Bosnia, they were also settled in Macedonia, Sanciak, Croatia and Kosova. Their continued existence was contingent on their relations and connections within a union. We tried to preserve the unity of Yugoslavia since it was to our advantage to do so. But there was nothing we could do. After the separation of Croatia and Slovenia, the Yugoslavian army intervened in these two countries. A ceasefire was declared between the Croatian and Yugoslav armies at the beginning of 1992. The Yugoslav army withdrew from Croatia to Bosnia. So we were aware that disaster was looming. Here I must admit that even if I warned our people of the possibility of war, I did not expect the

Serbs to start a massacre directed against the Muslims. Because of the time and place we were living in, I did not expect this; we were living in Europe, at the end of the 20th century. Who would have thought that at the end of the 20th century a nation could massacre another nation? Unfortunately, this happened, and the prophecy I had made in December, 1991, came true.

AE: The entire world knows that during the independence war your country suffered enormous difficulties and pains. I want you to share your memories of that time with us, how it affected you personally and what meaning it has for the future.

AI: The most important event in July, 1995, that not only shook me but also the entire Muslim population of Bosnia-Herzegovina was the Srebrenica massacre in which we lost 7-8 thousand of our people. This is the biggest civilian massacre since World War II. No doubt I have a lot of memories. I lived 1,200 days under siege in Sarajevo during which it is estimated more than 700,000 bullets fell on us each day. No one who lived through that nightmare can ever forget what it was like. The destruction of the historical Mostar bridge is another unforgettable memory. Perhaps the moment of its destruction was the hardest moment for us in the war. We were surrounded on all sides. It was the third winter of the war. I still remember very clearly who informed me that the Mostar bridge had been shelled, and what kind of mood I was in at that moment in November, 1993. But the resistance of my people in this war is the thing that shall always be in our minds. This resistance will be remembered as the miracle of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Here we managed to stop the fourth – best equipped army in Europe. We managed to defend most of the major cities and the most part of the countryside. We produced guns in 65 military factories. In spite of the embargo on weapon, we got weapons, mostly from the Islamic countries. If someone asked me what impressed me most in the war, I should say it was our resistance. All the world admired our stand. We showed that we are a nation that won a victory under siege, and passed the test of fire with flying colours. In Sarajevo alone more than 10,000 were killed, 1,300 of them children. Since we did not have access to cemeteries to bury our dead, we turned the parks and football fields into cemeteries. The Islamic world could not come together on any other topic the way they did to help Bosnia. The Islamic world is a vast world composed of different nations, different régimes and subject to foreign interference. In spite of all these differences it is a world that managed to unite on the Bosnian issue. Huntington, who noticed this, in one of his works points out that the Islamic world united on the Bosnian issue and came to our aid. This aid was military or practical or moral. Turkey is one of the pioneering countries of the Islamic world that helped Bosnia. Turkey has helped us a lot. Even today I cannot explain the full extent of her assistance. At this point I'd like to express my gratitude to the Turkish people for their support. As for the Western world, so far as I can see they betrayed their own principles. Judged by their declaration that they are prepared to intervene to prevent a massacre wheresoever it takes place, they sat back and did nothing. In Bosnia-Herzegovina there was out-and-out massacre. And for three years the Western world acted as if were not happening. It was obvious that they were hoping the Muslims would be annihilated. At last, the intervention of the Western countries that had been waited for so long took place. NATO powers bombed the Serb positions in August, 1995, and the war ended shortly thereafter. After the intervention in August an agreement was signed in November at Dayton. It was an unjust agreement signed under pressure from the West, especially America. In spite of everything it was an agreement that brought peace. But the Dayton agreement cannot solve the Bosnia-Herzegovina problem. Because of the conditions of Dayton very serious problems about the administration of government occurred. The behaviour of the Western countries has not changed. I am forced to conclude that they only helped us to the extent of opening the door to refugees, and that was very important for us. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) prevented the mass deaths of people from starvation by organising the food-aid campaigns.

AE: Even if it rewarded the guilty in a sense, Dayton stopped the guns. Bosnia-Herzegovina is waking up to a new future. How do you see this future?

AI: Muslims defended the integrity of Bosnia, making real the ideal of living together with all the inherited cultural and other differences. The warrant of the maintenance of its existence is the existence of the Muslims. I see Bosnia as a European country. I see its future in being a member of the family of Europe. But we must solve our identity problem. Our belonging to Europe enables us to maintain our physical existence, but on the other hand it can destroy us on our spiritual side. As the people of Bosnia-Herzegovina we must solve our material and spiritual problems. I think that Turkey is facing the same problems. Turkey both wants to integrate with Europe and at the same time retain her special identity. Just like Turkey, I think Bosnia should be a bridge between East and West. Bosnia must lean on two powerful sources: the Western culture and the Eastern tradition. It is the basic problem that Bosnians and Turks must solve on their own.

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